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Women in Leadership



SIX STORIES OF ALUMNAE SUCCESS

By Denise Mattson

Since 1917, women have been studying in DePaul's business school and carving out challenging careers for themselves.

To commemorate this historic 100th anniversary milestone, six highly successful alumnae reflect on their professional lives and share advice for the next generation of women leaders.

Traversing the world and making meaningful contributions in diverse industries, these remarkable women have broken barriers and advanced their careers with sure footing on uneven terrain. Indeed, a new national initiative among more than 30 influential corporate CEOs called Paradigm for Parity launched recently to close the gender gap in business and create a new normal that brings power, status and opportunity into balance for women and men.

Meanwhile, a new book by Joann Lublin, management news editor for the Wall Street Journal, explores the stories of 52 female executives, laying bare both the progress women in leadership have made and the obstacles that remain on their path to equality on the career ladder. In "Earning It: Hard-Won Lessons from Trailblazing Women at the Top of the Business World," Lublin found that resilience, persistence and confidence were among the most valuable traits of women executives. The women profiled here possess these qualities and have powerful advice for women following in their footsteps.



Joanna M. Bauza (MBA '01), president of The Cervantes Group, teaches a course in leadership at DePaul.

EMILIA DIMENCO

President and CEO, Women's Business
Development Center, Chicago
(BUS '80, MBA '83)



“Opportunity is the first step to independence.”

The plan for Emilia DiMenco's life may sound familiar to the children of working-class immigrants: hard work and a college degree would be the path to a better life for the next generation.

Growing up in south suburban Blue Island with other Italian immigrants, DiMenco excelled in the math and science classes the Servite Sisters in her Catholic grade school emphasized. After working her way through DePaul's business school, she graduated at age 25 and landed a coveted slot in the management training program at Harris Bank (now BMO Harris).

Then she began breaking glass ceilings.

DiMenco became the first woman senior vice president and, later, executive vice president in the corporate and commercial bank at BMO Harris, leading to “a wonderful” 30-year banking career there.

However, it almost didn't happen.

A class-action lawsuit by the U.S. Department of Labor and the National Organization for Women against Chicago banks in the late 1970s challenged the different training programs offered to men and women. As a result, banks started recruiting staff differently, broadening the list of universities where they recruited and interviewing diverse students who had not previously made it into their hiring pools. DiMenco believes she would not have been hired but for the impact of the lawsuit. “That really builds the case for public policy to change the way all of us behave,” she argues.

“I attribute my success to sponsors who supported my work on projects and advocated for my promotions,” she says. It was important to her to pay those opportunities forward when she entered top management by opening doors for other women and people of color who, like her, may not have had the customary preparation.

DiMenco continues to foster economic independence for women today as the president and CEO of the Women's Business Development Center (WBDC) in Chicago, where she seeks to change statistics showing that just 5 percent of federal contracts go to women-owned businesses.

One of the services that WBDC provides to build capacity is women's business enterprise (WBE) certification. This recognition enables WBE-certified businesses to differentiate themselves when they bid on private-sector and some public-sector contracts.

While women own 38 percent of businesses, “there still isn't equal opportunity,” DiMenco laments, noting that they face barriers in accessing contacts and capital. “Opportunity is the first step to independence,” DiMenco says. “I am lucky to be able to help women realize the opportunity and achieve independence every day.”

MONIQUE NELSON

CEO, UWG
(MBA '03)

Monique Nelson has parlayed an early interest in the entertainment industry, which gave her an opportunity to work with artists John Legend, Common and Madonna, into a career as the influential CEO of one of the oldest black-owned marketing and advertising agencies in America. Nelson, a classically trained singer and dancer who grew up in Brooklyn, assumed the helm of UWG in 2012. Today, companies like Ford, Colgate and Pfizer seek UWG's expertise when they need a cultural navigator to reach a diverse customer base.

Nelson's proving grounds were at International Paper in Chicago during the mid-1990s. In their quest to help the company sell more paper, her sales and marketing team recommended expanding the basic line of yellow Post-it notes to include the brightly colored options available today.

UWG (or UniWorld Group, Inc.) was founded in 1969 as African-American, Latino, Asian and LGBT communities began to emerge as consumer markets, according to Nelson. "We believe in talking to somebody, not everybody," Nelson says. "Understanding diverse consumers is not just giving them a canned message, but talking to them in the right place, in the right space and in the right context."

As a woman leader in business today, Nelson finds herself more the exception than the rule. "There are a lot of women in our industry, but not at the top of the house," Nelson recognizes. "That concerns me because most consumers are women, and we add dimension to a room."

Nelson had many mentors and sponsors who supported her rise in business. "They were oftentimes my tie-breaker or the truth that I wasn't prepared to tell myself. They see things in you that you may not want to see, or, when you are down on yourself, you should have seen," Nelson explains. "One of my mentors told me,



"Women need to ask for what they want, and if they don't get it, they can go build it themselves."

'You're enough, stop worrying about what everybody thinks.' That was huge to me. Stop worrying about being a girl, stop worrying that they are all guys, stop worrying that they are all white. You're enough."

More women will reach the top ranks of business when they understand that they are enough, Nelson believes. "Women need to ask for what they want, and if they don't get it, they can go build it themselves," she urges.

"You create your own destiny."

CARRIE MEGHIE

Co-President, Becker Ventures
Founder, Jackson Chance Foundation
(BUS '96)



**“I never expect more from anyone
than I expect from myself.”**

Carrie Meghie takes family matters to a new level. She and her sister Jill Mast are co-presidents of Becker Ventures, the real estate investment holding company their father started. The company now owns the Hard Rock Hotel Chicago and a 41-story luxury apartment building at 200 N. Michigan Ave. Meghie and her husband, Terry, extended the family business connections by co-founding the offshoot Becker Entertainment group, which has developed three brands, one of which—the Jamaican restaurant Mr. Brown’s Lounge—is embedded in Terry’s Caribbean roots and features his brother as executive chef.

Yet the family matter dearest to her heart is the Jackson Chance Foundation, a nonprofit she and Terry launched to provide free parking at Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago for the families of babies in the neonatal intensive care unit. Their late son, Jackson, spent 10 months fighting a devastating lung condition at the hospital, where nearby parking can cost more than \$50 a day. Meghie chairs the board of the foundation, carving out time she would have spent with Jackson “to care for his memory” by helping other families facing similar hardships.

For her leadership of the foundation she earned honors as a CNN Hero and a Chicago Magazine Chicagoan of the Year in 2016. In 2017, the program will expand to Northwestern Medicine/Prentice Women’s Hospital.

Meghie is a decisive woman who knows how to lead, from managing 200 employees at the Hard Rock Hotel to performing the ownership representative role at her new residential development. “I lead by example,” she says. “I never expect more from anyone than I expect from myself. I believe people are the most important asset in any company and in every industry,” she notes, adding that they must be valued, appreciated and recognized.

Because her entry into the business came as the owner’s daughter, she found some people underestimated her abilities. “It was challenging, and I felt like I had more to prove. It gave me greater determination to do a good job.”

Twenty years later, after netting their own business successes, Meghie and her sister work on balancing their families and careers. “There’s a lot of talk about doing it all or having it all. I don’t think that’s possible. Something has to give, and it’s going to change over time,” Meghie says. Due to their young families, Meghie and her sister are in a business maintenance stage, foregoing certain opportunities now and scheduling growth in the future when they anticipate a better work-life balance.

JOANNA M. BAUZA

President and Co-Founder,
The Cervantes Group
(MBA '01)

Family businesses are in Joanna Bauza's bloodline. This third-generation entrepreneur raised in Guaynabo, Puerto Rico, learned about business from her grandparents and parents. She recalls breaking a customer's credit card by pressing too hard to make an impression on the manual card reader while working in her parents' hardware store as a teen.

Today she doesn't need to work so hard to make an impression.

The success of The Cervantes Group, a multinational, multimillion-dollar business she co-founded with her husband, speaks for itself. The technology talent acquisition and services company ranked No. 1465 on the Inc. 5000 list of the fastest-growing private companies in the United States, as well as one of its top Hispanic companies.

Bauza is comfortable as a female executive on the international stage. She has traveled the world for both business and sport: the former as a business owner with offices in Puerto Rico, Spain and Mexico, the latter as the No. 1 ranked tennis player in Puerto Rico.

"I relate everything back to tennis," she says. "Sports and business are very similar. You have to know how to work as a team. You have to lead people to one goal. You need mental toughness, and you cannot lose faith when things don't look good. When you are losing 6-2, 4-2, it doesn't mean that the game is over. You can stay strong and try to find your opponent's weakness. You keep striving, keep pushing and never quit."

Athletes excel at career transitions that require them to pivot, Bauza believes. "You go through different chapters in your life. You have to successfully close one chapter and start another, but you bring all that knowledge and experience to the next one."



**"You have to know how to work as a team.
You have to lead people to one goal."**

Bauza encourages students at DePaul, where she teaches a class in leadership, to emulate this practice. "I tell students, 'Where you are right now will be very different from where you will be in five years.'" She advises them to bring their special experiences and accomplishments forward to apply them in a fresh context.

In Bauza's iteration of the family business, responsibilities are split by professional strengths. Her husband focuses on business development functions for their organization, while her background as a programmer and web developer positions her as the technical expert on clients' staffing needs.

Bauza is mother to a 12-year-old girl and 10-year-old boy. Her best advice for balancing family and business is to "have self-determination, be forward-looking and always be a great leader. You never stop learning or growing."

DIANE PEARSE

CEO, Hickory Farms
(MBA '86)



“Good leaders need to be strong, smart, decisive and authentic.”

Was there a delicious basket of goodies from Hickory Farms shared at one of your holiday gatherings last year? Is there a Redbox DVD sitting on your counter? Do you get excited when you get a gift in the iconic black-and-white box from Crate & Barrel? Have you filled your tank with BP Amoco gas recently?

These are some of the omnipresent brands Diane Pearse has helped shape during her career. Currently the CEO and president of Hickory Farms, LLC, Pearse has witnessed a world of change for women employees and women leaders during her 35-plus years in business.

“Earlier in my career, I needed to fit the mold to show I was part of the team,” she explains. There were times she compromised who she was to fit in, she says, like the time in her late 20s, in the male-dominated world of oil and gas, when an offensive cartoon of a Playboy bunny was shown at a meeting to make a point.

“I had to laugh along, despite the fact that I was mortified,” she says. “I couldn’t go to HR and make a complaint. I had to be one of the boys and go along. It was a time when women were patiently gaining momentum in the workplace.”

At times, she stifled her warm personality. “I hug people,” she confesses, but that was not acceptable in the business environment of the 1980s.

The business environment has evolved since then. “It is OK to show vulnerability and say that I don’t know how to do (this thing) or that I need someone’s help,” she notes, and she does these things without hesitation in her career today. This is a stark contrast to the business atmosphere three decades ago. Then, she recalls, “Leaders thought that strength came from a façade and that they couldn’t show weakness.”

That’s one reason why authenticity is so important to her. “Authenticity lets people know who you are, what they can expect from you and that you are being true to your word.” It’s the reason people she worked with at previous jobs followed her to Hickory Farms. “They say, ‘I’m here because of Diane. I’m doing this for you.’” Being genuine motivates staff to give something extra to get the job done right, she believes.

“Millennial women don’t realize how different it is now,” Pearse says. “Today, women are looked at for our work. We have an equal opportunity to rise in our careers, just as the man sitting next to us does. We share household and child responsibilities with our partner and don’t have to choose whose career will be put on hold. Millennial women can relish the fact that so many women before them made the opportunities of today possible.”

Yet, Pearse believes the traits of a good leader are the same no matter one’s gender. “Good leaders need to be strong, smart, decisive and authentic.”

CAROL BRAMSON

Entrepreneur, Private Equity
Investor and CEO
(BUS '89)

From her first job at a venture capital company that invested in health care to her latest challenge as CEO of a natural pet food business, Carol Bramson has made a career out of keeping others healthy.

Growing up in a health-focused household, she developed positive habits that she still maintains today. From clean eating to running, cycling and yoga, Bramson stays active in her personal life to help her stay sharp in her professional life. This health and wellness orientation made her a great match for her first job at a venture capital firm. “I just loved that we were investing in health-care-focused businesses that had a direct and positive impact on people’s lives.”

When First Chicago Equity Capital recruited her into a leadership-training program for her next job, she found fast success, impressing a supervisor who became a mentor. “He basically walked me over to the head of the private equity group and gave me a glowing reference,” recalls Bramson.

After returning from maternity leave a couple of years later, she became a partner in that group—the only woman in a practice of six. Although outnumbered by her male colleagues, Bramson remembers a supportive environment. “The culture of the group was about empowerment and teamwork. It felt like a family, and we were able to accomplish great things together.”

Bramson went on to build an exciting career by finding opportunities that matched her values and vision. Sometimes she found it in existing companies; other times she had to build opportunity by creating a culture of employee empowerment and innovation.

“I consider myself a business builder, and for me, aligning a company’s culture with the vision and mission is an incredibly powerful experience.”



“The style of culture I like to put in place is focused on transparency and employee empowerment.”

When she jumped from board member to CEO of a juvenile products company, she found some staff had lost their voice, and it was up to her to reinvigorate them. “To me, not having these brilliant engineers feel empowered enough to confidently speak their minds and share their personal and professional opinions was a great disservice to the business and their colleagues. We quickly moved to change that and it had a significant impact on the turnaround of the company.”

“The style of culture I like to put in place is focused on transparency and employee empowerment,” says Bramson. “We can talk about anything—and we should. Every environment I’m in represents an opportunity to seek out talent and to support those people to bring out their best.”